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TRENDS IN ADULT READING

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TRENDS EVIDENT IN ADULT READING DURING THE 1960'S IN THE AREAS OF ADMINISTRATION, PROGRAMS, TEACHING, TECHNIQUES, RESEARCH PROJECTS, AND METHODS OF PROMOTION OF READING PROGRAMS ARE DISCUSSED. TWO INSTANCES OF COMMERCIAL EXPLOITATION BASED ON INTENSE AND OFTEN FALLACIOUS ADVERTISING AND ON PUBLIC IGNORANCE ARE CITED. A POSITIVE TREND IN THE AREA OF RESEARCH ON THE NATURE OF ADULT READING IS NOTED. THE FINDINGS OF STUDIES ON HIGH SPEED READING BY SPACHE, TAYLOR AND LIDDLE, THALBERG AND ELLER, STEPHENS AND ORAM, AND SHALE ARE REVIEWED. MORE RESEARCH IS RECOMMENDED IN THE AREA OF INNER OR SUBVOCAL SPEECH. ANOTHER POSITIVE TREND IS TOWARD THE DEVELOPMENT OF READING PROGRAMS FOR BUSINESS AND INDUSTRIAL CONCERNS. THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY, PARTICULARLY OF NEW YORK UNIVERSITY, IN FOSTERING THE DEVELOPMENT AND SUPERVISION OF BUSINESS AND INDUSTRIAL PROGRAMS IS DISCUSSED. (LS)

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TRENDS IN ADULT READING

When we speak of trends, we must think in terms of direction. Directions may go toward either the good or the bad, or they may do both. As in fact they do both in adult reading today.

Trends may also encompass various aspects of a subject, such as Administration, programs, teaching techniques, research projects and methods of promotion. In adult reading they are at work in all of these areas.

At their worst, the current trends remind me of a short conversation that took place during my graduate school days in a course on tests and measurements. A student had asked the professor just which way the testing movement was going. The professor, a very eminent man in the field, replied that it was going to hell and it was going there very fast.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, the same can be said for some of the worst trends in adult reading. At their best, there are many trends in the field that are excellent. But at their worst they are like the little girl in Longfellows poem, they are absolutely horrid.

The worst of the trends in adult reading stem largely from shady promotions. This promotion in turn appears to have arisen from someone's discovery that one can earn a good deal of money from adult reading. This discovery has resulted in several unfortunate promotional attempts of which two might be mentioned.

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The first was a home study course that was assembled by an executive of a publishing concern and was marketed through the Book of the Month Club a few years ago. The course itself was nothing remarkable. It was the sort of thing that might have been taught in the earlier adult reading courses — particularly those that appeared right after World War II. Its biggest instructional weakness was simply the fact that it was outdated at the time it appeared. The author showed an obvious lack of knowledge of any developments in the field that had taken place through 1950's. The program came on to the market in 1960.

There was nothing unusual in this program at first. It simply appeared to be one of many second-rate programs that were then coming on the market every once in a while. Admittedly these programs are not the best available, still they are at least honest.

What made this program different was the fact that it was advertised as being the reading program of Columbia University. The Book of the Month Club took full page advertisements in such newspapers as the New York Times. In it they proclaimed that this was the program that Columbia University offered to its students and to the general public.

Now the fact of the matter is that Columbia University does not have a reading program. It does not have a reading center or reading clinic for its undergraduate students, and no branch of the University offers any such courses to the general public. This includes Teachers College. There is a remedial reading course in writing and reading. It is offered to students in the School of General Studies, but this was not the same thing.

Those of us who are aware of this, were shocked when the advertisement continued. I asked some minor administrators of New York University to make some inquiries about this matter. They were most reluctant to do so. Finally I asked one of the deans who called someone at Columbia. The Dean told me that his counterpart could get no information to help us. He promised to keep on trying.

Then just as suddenly as it had begun, the advertising changed. The Book of the Month Club continued to take full page advertisements, but suddenly dropped the claim that this was a Columbia course. This advertising has continued, but for years afterwards I would get an occasional question of what I knew about the "Columbia Course". The questioner was always amazed when I answered that there wasn't any.and I am sure, there are many times that I was not believed.

I later hearyd that several of the University's trustees had been very upset about this advertising and had voiced loud and long objections to it. It was apparently these objections that stopped the claims. Certainly it was not the inquiry that I had caused to be made.

The other unfortunate example of commercial exploration and promotion of a questionable matter is that of our old friend Mrs. Wood, or to be more exact of the organization that used her name. I have been told by people who have investigated this organisation that she herself has little or nothing to do with it any more. — That there is a syndicate that now runs it - and, of course, promotes it heavily.

The promotion of this organization is now on a scale that has

never before been seen. I will not go as far as to say that they are taking over a field of adult reading, but they are certainly doing the biggest bulk of it in many metropolitan areas.

They do this by a hammer type of advertising that seems to exist on an enormous profit. In the New York City area, for example their advertising makes use of full pages in the newspapers on a regular basis. When they are about to begin a session they saturate some of the local radio stations with advebising each hour throughout the day. They have over half a dozen locations in the New York City areas.and I understand that franchises are being let all over the country. A magazine article quoted their profits as 33 and 1/3 per cent, so you can see the motivation behind this effort.

The claims are the old familiar ones with very little polishing up. Reading rates are astronomical, comprehension is poorly defined. Reading is not defined at all. Skimming,of course, is never mentioned. Special skills are not mentioned in it at all. The advertising line is, in effect, the same that we have had to live with for the past several years.

That such a line and so much exposure would tend to effect those who do not know any better is to be expected, of course, but its effects have not stopped here. I myself, was shocked a few years ago to hear a discourse on this matter by a man who is well known in reading in the North Eastern part of the United States. This man evidently has never appeared at a National Reading Conference, as far as I know. In any case he witnessed a demonstration of the Wood approach and came away thoroughly convinced.

Indeed he rather scornfully compared these numbers to those of the rest of us who teach adult reading and sneered at the lower number quoted by those of us who, he said, "use machines".

I was amazed that a man who claimed to be a reading expert and whose reputation is as fine as his could show such ignorance of the way in which adults read. Many of you here may have had simmilar experiances but it shocked me. Fortunately this sort of thing is rare in my experiance and so I do not have to call it a trend, but simply an unfortunate by-product of one. I am relating this experiance to you simply to show what can happen with a combination of intense advertising and ignorance.

The gentlemen, that I spoke ofwould have been a good deal less astonished, had he taken the trouble to familiarise himself with some of the research that had been completed at the time he made the speech. He would have known, for example, that Dr. Spache had already looked into the claims that had been made and had run a fine study to see what was happening. He utilized camera and comprehension checks and found that the average rate of reading of these people was four hundred to six hundred words per minute, with the fastest being about nine hundred words per minute. He also found that skimming rates ran much higher — eighteen hundred to twentyfour hundred words per minute. He concluded definitely that these were skimming, because he checked the reading from the point of view of comprehension as well as that of photographing eye movements. Dr. Spache did not set out to debunk anyones claims, but he showed conclusively that the claims made were actually those for skimming. [illegible]

At about the same time other studies by Taylor and Liddle reached very much the same conclusions.

This was a few years ago. One would have hoped that these studies might have started another trend — that of further investigations into the exact nature of adult reading in order to clarify questions of this sort. After all we do not know nearly as much as we should about just what happens when a reasonably intelligent adult sets out to read something. And if we don't know what happens when he reads, we certainly cannot pretend to know what happens when he skims.

Thalberg and Eller attempted to add some light to this issue at the 1963 meeting of the National Reading Conference. Their findings tended to confirm those of Spache, Taylor and Liddle in that these high speeds appeared to be skimming.

In that same year, an interesting study was published by Stephens and Orem. It attempted to go into the matter of just what fast reading is. They checked a large group of people who, according to their own claims, completed a reading course at speeds of over fifteen hundred words per minute. The characteristics of the people involved may be summed up as follows:

All of the people entered the course reading at speeds of over three hundred words per minute. I think that all of us would agree that, by and large, people who begin reading courses at better than average speeds are likely to end up with faster speeds than others.

They all completed the course reading at speeds of over fifteen hundred words per minute. Most of us would not claim

results that are that high or at least we should say that they were skimming rather than reading.

They could read at these speeds only in familiar materials for which they had a good conceptual background. I think that for most reading people this would go without saying.

Reading was a major form of recreation for all of them and none of them recalled any difficulty in learning to read as a child. All reported that they were above average in academic achievement.

The next idea is an interesting one and I will quote:

" "All of the first readers evidenced good visual memory. A dependence on visual imagery and a general preference for visual symbolic experiance over the aural". This is an interesting conclusion in that it mentions one of the facets of fast efficient reading. It brings up two questions:

1) The authors do not give us any details as to how they determine this factor.

2) There seems to be an implication that some people favor either the visual or the aural. There may be a good deal of truth to this. However, many of us have found that people can have their emphsis changed from the aural to the visual if the proper teaching techniques are employed and that the change can go on to a remarkable degree. Many of us would feel that it is a mistake to categorize readers as either fast or slow without first seeing how effective such instruction can be.

Coupled with that is a conclusion by Stephens and Orem that the faster readers do not require "inner speach" as an essential

element in reading comprehension. However, they all experianced some of it in reading, even at faster speeds.

This would check very closely with the experiances of those of us who spend a great deal of time teaching adult reading. We know that one of the characteristics of slow reading is excessive dependence upon inner speech. We also know that the reduction of this inner speech can contribute a great deal to increased reading speed, without loss of reading comprehension, and we know that this is a good part of many courses in adult reading.

Here we have an area that cries out for more research. We all deal with it constantly and yet conflicting claims are made for the effects of inner speech. Most of us feel that we cut it down but do not eliminate it and that reading speeds up to eight hundred or more words per minute are possible with a smaller amount of inner speech. Mrs. Wood claims that she eliminates it completely but that it takes a speed of fifteen hundred words per minute to do so. She cites no research to back this up and the research that there is tends to contradict it. All of us who teach adults to read better would agree on the need for more exact and definitive research in this area.

I cannot say what form this research should take. New procedures will have to be developped; new instruments will have to be used. The research may require the assistance of neurologists and psychaistrists. It will certainly call for new, bold and imaginative ideas. But it should be done and I should like to be able to stand here two or three years from now and be able to say that such work is in progress, and is a strong trend in adult

reading.

An even more startling result was reported by the same team. They claim the following:

"...all reported that they read parts of several lines as they went across the page;they did not need to observe thesequence of speech:.

I will not attempt to pass judgement on this claim, particularly since no investigation of this claim has been done to establish and to prove or disprove its possibility. Many of us would feel that the claim is nonsense, nevertheless; there it is. It should be investigated thoroughly.

The conclusions that were reached at the end of this study are two fold. Many of us would disagree with the first, but I think that no one would quarrel with the second.

The first conclusion is that there is a significant proportion of the population in the United States who can read at speeds in excess of fifteen hundred words per minute. This is a conclusion with which many of us would disagree.

The second conclusion is that the nature of this phenomenon deserves attention and study. With this no one would have any quarrel. Let us hope that more such studies come along in the near future.

A more recent study by Florence Shale was reported in the Journal of Reading for April 1965. It may well be useful in helping us to understand the claims that we frequently hear these days. Her object in this study was to check methods of what she called "vertical reading" and by this she meant any reading in which the eyes do not move horizontaly across the line. This, of course, in-

cluded most of our skimming techniques as we think of them today.

She divided the various skimming techniques into three parts. Two of them she called "directed" skimming and she refered to one of them as "non directed" skimming. Directed skimming consisted of the two traditional approaches as most of us think of them. These are:

1) Reading only selected parts of the material with the object of obtaining the highlights only.
2) Reading only the material in which one is interested. This is also known to many of us as "scanning".

Her study added nothing to what we do not already know about our directional skimming and scanning techniques.

By"non directed" skimming she means the practice of reading down the middle of the page. This, of course, is what Spache and Taylor refer to when they report that Mrs. Wood's techniques amounted to skimming. She reports that for most people this is possible only if the column, as printed, is not more than 1.25 inches wide. Such a width may be characteristic of many newspaper columns but certainly not of most printed material. Florence Shale's study seems, therefore, to agree with all previous studies which would tend to show that reading speeds much in excess of eight hundred words per minute are not reading but skimming.and that the advertising that says otherwise is a disservice to people. It is highly doubtful, however, that she can do much to correct this trend. We will simply have to continue our own work in our own way. We can only hope that the public will eventually become disillusioned with outrageous claims, while not giving up the idea of

reading improvement altogether.

There is another area in adult reading which shows signs of being an encoureging trend, and that is the area of reading programs for business and industrial concerns. As we know, business and industry has been interested in reading programs for a good many years now, and has been quite active in its use of all kinds of programs. This includes programs from people like ourselves, packaged devices from commercial firms, the company's own instructors, and just about every form of instruction there is. As of three years ago, a study presented by Dr. Patterson at this conference showed that almost half of all companies had tried reading improvement programs over a four year period. Half of these companies had programs in effect at the time the study was made.

Judging from the experiance of New York University within the New York metropolitan area, the number seems to be growing still. The University was one of the first to run reading programs for business and industry anywhere in the country. Its experiance would suggest that there is a great deal still to be done in this field and that other institutions should make determined efforts to do such programs for business and industrial firms in their area, if they are permitted to do so.

We may reasonably suppose, I think, that business and industry should have a better record than the general public in its choice of educational programs. It should be less subject to high pressure advertising and rediculous claims, and in general it is.

Business and industry generally have facilities for checking the value of competing educational establishments in advance of committing themselves to any program, and they frequently do just that. I have known of cases where giant corporations in the New York area sent men to take reading courses in all available institutions. In one case that I know of, three men were sent to each establishment and each one submitted written reports to the training director. He then proceeded to confirm this report with information that he was abbet to obtain from the organization themselves, after which he decided which one of the programs he would use. In this particular case the investigation lead to a program that began in 1961 and is still continuing. The program is for one of the larger insurance companies, which has its headquarters in New York City.

It would seem reasonable to expect such activity on the part of any good training director. After all, he is usually a man with a background, not only in personnel work, but also in education. He should, and usually does make it his business to know what is happening in each of the fields that concern him, and he certainly has the facilities to get the information that he needs. He should be much harder to fool than the general public, and our experiance at New York University tends to show that he is.

Of course, there are exceptions to this. There was an unfortunate case of a major oil company where the training director apparently swallowed the advertising without investigation. This particular director was warned by his colleagues of other companies

that he was making a big mistake, but did not change his mind. In a case of this sort it is frustrating to watch what happens but one can never be sure of the pressures that may exist. The fact that this particular director did not investigate all that was available and did not report to the firm would suggest that he may not have had much choice in the matter. Inevitably this is one of the hazzards that is involved in dealing with large companies. Occasionally a vice president or a president may overrule a knowledgable training director, to the detriment of the company.

Still our experience with business and industry at New York University over a thirteen year period has been an encouraging one. We began with programs for such pioneer organizations as the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, and the Port of New York Authority. These consisted of both reading improvement programs and clerical perception programs and both were quite successful. As of now, both these programs continue to run. The Port of New York Authority does so on its own and the Federal Reserve Bank still calls in the University.

In those days the programs were taught by either an instructor or supervisor of the Reading Institute of New York University, simply as an extra chore— something that he did in addition to his regular duties, usually for an extra fee. But over the years the number of programs requested of the University increased to the point where a supervisor was appointed whose jobs were: 1) to teach the business and industry programs and 2) to administer the Reading Improvements for Adults, that is run in the evening hours, and that is open to the general public. I myself was asked

to take this position in 1956, after I had returned from an industrial reading program for the motion picture industry in Southern California -- a program that had occupied my time for half a year.

At the time I came into this position it was just starting to move along. The programs were still the exclusive province of the Reading Institute and were under its administrative staff. Generally speaking I was permitted to run them as I saw fit. But from time to time peculiar pressures and situations came along that resulted from the fact that the Reading Institute is, after all, a remedial reading institution. These pressures were not serious, however and from 1956 to 1961 the program grew to such an extent that while one man could still handle it, he had little time for anything else.

In 1961 it came to the attention of the Dean of Extension Services at the New York University that the Reading Improvement Program for Business and Industry was not then making full use of the resources of the University and it was not making full use of an office that had long existed whose purpose was to establish and administer educational programs of all kinds to business and industry. The Dean set up a reading program for business and industrial concerns which combined the facilities of the Reading Institute and the University office of Special Services to Business and Industry. From 1961 to 1966 these programs were run by the two offices jointly. I still continued to do most of the teaching, but had help when the occasion determined it. For this help we drew on the staff of the Reading Institute.

The program cntinued to grow to a point where the present Dean,

of the School of Continuing Education felt that another administrative change was advisable. Toward that end he recently created the position of Coordinator of Reading Services for Business and Industry as part of the University Office of Special Services to Business and Industry. This is the position that I now hold and at its creation, it was hoped that this would further expand the program to the point where an independent organization would be required to administer it.

Whether this will prove to be the case or not is not yet clear, since the position was only created this fall. But let us hope, that which ever way it goes, that it will prove to be a trend in reading improvement programs. Of course, reading programs should come from colleges and universities, but of course, we do not have the advertising budget to keep up with private organizations. Indeed most universities do not have an office that is set up to run programs for business and industrial programs as New York University has, and this, of course, must limit movement in this direction.

Still a great deal can be done to extend our influence in adult reading. We must, however, become reasonably aggressive to do so. and this is extremely difficult for many of us to do. It should be done, however, if we are going to continue an essentially healthy trend.

I would hope that the next report on Trends in Adult Reading will report a greatly expanded influence of such organizations.